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A Pennsylvanian in Washington Intelligence About the CIA

By GEORGE R. PACKARD III

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Washington has been shaken over the past two weeks by almost daily revelations of the subsidies from the Central Intelligence Agency through a maze of private foundations to students, labor, the press, the church, a Harvard Dean, and Norman Thomas. Although some tales of the CIA's involvement with free institutions had leaked out earlier, the extent of its dealings with Americans at home and abroad had not been widely known, and the uproar now is greater than at any time since the Bay of Pigs disaster in 1961.



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The reactions of "official Washington" have been amazing. President Johnson put out the word that he didn't know what was going on, and ordered CIA Director Richard Helms, along with Under Secretary of State Katzenbach and Secretary John Gardner of HEW, to find out.

Katzenbach, who just finished working with the Crime Commission and is supposed to be reorganizing the State Department, announced he was going to Africa in May.

Vice President Humphrey, who presumably has access to information about CIA activities and could have acted earlier to correct the situation, declared himself "not at all happy."

Robert Kennedy, who was in a position to know everything the CIA was doing in 1961-63, claims he "didn't focus on" subsidies to students. But he adds that the President knew—or could have known.

But even as the big fish contort themselves to get off the hook, much of the press commentary has revealed a new maturity in this country about the need for and limitations of an intelligence organization in a free society. The beginning of wisdom is to understand that the CIA does nothing without the knowledge and full approval of the highest authorities in Government.

It may be that the time for secret U. S. aid to private American groups is past. But it is well to remember that in the 1940's and 1950's we were engaged in a serious struggle to reach the minds of youth and students and future leaders all over the world—to prevent them from closing their options for independence and for open societies in their own developing nations.

The U. S. Government could not have known then, as we know now, of the Communists' colossal stupidity. It would have been risky and foolish to sit back and let them have the field. We could not have predicted that their attempts to export an inefficient economic system would be such a spectacular failure, that the Sino-Soviet Bloc would split, that our own economy would be so tremendously successful, and that freedom would become an epidemic.

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It made sense, in the conditions of the 1950's, to help American students get to important conferences abroad, to insure that their ideals would have a hearing. Since the CIA was the only part of the Government with the money and foresight and ability to act, it responded to the challenge.

Today it is not necessary for the CIA to continue these political functions. The recent revelations have all but ruled this out in any case.

But if Congress has learned anything at all, it should be that the American Government must find ways to help American students get to conferences, and for young leaders in foreign countries to make contact with their counterparts in this country. There is no need for secrecy.

On the other hand, let's not kid ourselves about the need for a strong, professional and dedicated intelligence service. It would be a tragedy if the current controversy lowers morale in the CIA or stems the flow of talented young men and women into its ranks.

For the truth is that we need more than ever the independent and expert collection and analysis of information about the strength and intentions of potential adversaries in this nuclear age.

If bright college students begin to doubt the need and value of this service, if CIA recruiters are hounded off campuses, if idealistic young men come to feel that the Agency's purposes are somehow morally degrading, then the worst fears of the critics will come true: the Agency will in time become a repository for second rate spooks, cynical cold warriors, and would-be James Bonds.

Today this is not the case. There is probably less dead wood in the Agency than in any other part of the Government. It has a career service, headed by Richard Helms (who was born in Wayne, Pa.), a competent and broad-gauged professional, and it includes a large number of public servants who share a concern for preserving the humane aspects of American life.

They deserve better than lame excuses from high officials. They need not worry about silly charges by pious "intellectuals" who say our students have been irretrievably "corrupted" by taking money from their Government.

The time for all of us to worry will come when we no longer have idealists who are willing to roll up their sleeves and get their hands dirty in the cause of freedom.